

SPEAKER COLFAX,

AND

The Union League Committee.

WITH THE

LETTER OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN,

TO

A. G. HODGES, OF KENTUCKY.

WASHINGTON :

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SPEAKER COLFAX AND THE UNION LEAGUE COMMITTEE.

A COMMITTEE of the Union League, Potomac Council—Hon. D. P. Holloway, President—consisting of Messrs. Lewis, Cook, Foster, Wood and Etter, waited on Speaker Colfax, with resolutions unanimously adopted by the Council, approving the course taken by him in reference to the treasonable utterances of Alexander Long, M. C., of Ohio.

Mr. Lewis, Chairman of the Committee, tendered the resolutions with remarks well suited to the occasion. He said:

MR. SPEAKER:—We come to convey to you resolutions approving of your course in moving to expel from the House of Representatives Mr. Long, of Ohio, for his treasonable language and conduct; and to say to you, our approval was unanimous, and even more ardent than is expressed in the resolutions. We only regret that there were not a constitutional number like-minded to have fully accomplished the work. We have to complain not only of the treason of these sympathizers with rebellion, but that they are continually raising false issues to deceive, and thus try to regain the power and influence they have lost. Hence, they clamor for “free speech,” and pretend to be advocates for “constitutional liberty,” keeping out of sight the fact that free speech ends where wrong speech begins. Words are the best index of the heart. If there were no treason within, there would be none on the tongue.

“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.” Eternal truth has decided the question. Wrong speech can no more be tolerated than wrong action. “By thy word thou shalt be condemned,” and “by thy words thou shalt be justified.” “Out of thine own mouth will I judge thee.” We have had enough of such free speech, and it must be stopped. Davis, Toombs & Co. were also great advocates of free speech, and it soon culminated in free stealing, free robbing, freebooting, and free murder; and such will always be the result if wrong speech or action be permitted; it will soon overcome all right speech and right action, and then, of course, there is an end to all true liberty.

It has long been our boast—and justly—that ours was a free country: but it is a country in which persons are free to do right and not to do wrong either in word or deed.

The proposition of the gentleman—of separation—cannot be entertained. None but base and wicked men could propose it, because we are forever bound to *guarantee* to every State a republican government; and therefore can never sanction such a despotism as the rebels seek to perpetuate; but if a majority could be base enough to consent, it would only prove their ruin, as “there would be war all the days of Jeroboam,” and forever after.

If we do not subdue the rebellion, it will subdue us. If with all the rivers in rebedom sealed; and the whole coast girded as with fire, we find the task no easy one, what could we do if we were to allow them to fill their rivers, and surround the coast with Merrimacs, Floridas, rams, and torpedos; there can be but one result, and the sooner this is understood and acted upon, the better.

No treaties can ever be made with them. Heaven never sanctioned, nor did man ever devise a more sacred and just compact than that made by our fathers; which they—without cause—have broken in every particular, and proved by their atrocities, that they are worse than savages.

Every means, to the last man and the last dollar, if need, must be used to restore the triumph of law and true liberty, with God, justice, and multitudes of true men on our side, we must succeed, and in this good work we wish you and your compatriots God speed, and a full share in our final, and we trust, glorious triumph.

Mr. COLFAX replied, in substance as follows:

GENTLEMEN:—Sincerely as I value the approval of my fellow-citizens generally, I value in the highest degree the testimonial you present to-night, in the resolutions adopted by the Union League of this city, of which you are a committee. Gratifying as they are as an indication and endorsement of my recent course, by those who have been witnesses of the act itself, they have a double value, when I consider the unconditional devotion to our country's cause, of those enrolled in your organization. And to this is added the speech of your chairman, whose patriotism, theology, and logic, are so harmoniously blended.

The speech which elicited the resolution you endorse, seemed to me an experiment, to ascertain what loyal people would bear in that direction; to be followed up, if unrebuked, by public meetings all over the country, echoing what had thus been declared as to the death and destruction of our Republic, and the recognition of the Traitor Cou-

federacy, under the very roof of the Capitol. And though the step I took might have been regarded as one of grave responsibility, as it was; yet as it seemed to be demanded by duty to the country, and the country's defenders in the field, it was taken unhesitatingly; and your hearty approval, as well as my own conscience, assures me that it was right.

What would follow the abandonment of this struggle for the preservation of the Union, and our consent that upon the ruins of the destroyed republic, another government might be planted, and admitted with our consent into the Family of Nations, I need scarcely recapitulate. But most painful to the patriot's heart would be the reflection, that the martyrs for the Union, who had died on so many battle-fields, had died in vain; and that their survivors would return, not to be welcomed with enthusiastic acclaim, as the saviours of the Union, but trailing behind them their dishonored flag, abandoning forever to traitors the large scope of the Confederacy won back to the Union by their valor. They would go downcast and humiliated to their homes, not to rejoice there over their campaigns, but to lament for the rest of their lives, that they ever went forth to the dangers of war at the call of a country which had so basely abandoned its own sacred cause. Our Revolutionary patriots, who dared all the perils of that era, to win for us the nationality that our heroes seek now to preserve, could speak with exultation and pride to child and grandchild, and friend, of their sacrifices and privations so willingly suffered for the Union, and each succeeding generation have added more and more glory to their immortal fame. But with our soldiers called back by a disgraceful abandonment of our cause and country, no future honor would recompense them for their sufferings. We cannot disgrace them. If we do, posterity will curse us as unworthy of the Republic we thus ignominiously surrendered.

We are told, it is true, of the great cost of this war and our enemies seek to appal us by frightful figures of the magnitude of our National Debt. I know it will cost heavily to save the country; but it will cost less to save it than to lose it. With its destruction comes endless anarchy, and endless war; a long border line, thousands of miles in extent, and thousands of strifes on either side; a cordon of custom-houses on the border; a standing army to guard the frontier we concede; still further division of the ruins of our country; the right to appeal from the ballot-box to the bullet, transplanted from Mexican soil to ours, by our own consent; until at last, after a generation of anarchy and revolution, we fall under the yoke of some foreign despot, who, either aided by our "estranged brethren," or not, tramples under foot what little semblance of liberty may be left. No, gentlemen, our

country must be saved, at whatever cost. If it takes every dollar of the nation's wealth, we shall, if successful, be no poorer than our fathers at the end of the revolutionary war. Indeed, throughout that struggle, they were bankrupt in all but hope and courage, faith in the right and devotion to liberty. And, for myself, I would not hesitate, if our country can certainly be saved, to sacrifice every dollar I possess. Without it, but with a preserved country, I should be rich indeed. With the country destroyed, and the reign of revolution following, let Mexico answer as to whether property is not as worthless as the Government that was powerless to protect its own existence.

Nor *can* we surrender, except at the voluntary sacrifice of all that is honorable in nations and in men. If we allow the sword of treason to sever the Republic, every friend of liberty in the world will turn their backs on us with scorn and contempt. If we abandon the graves of the loved and the lost, all over the sunny south, from Manassas and Richmond, across by Chicamauga and Vicksburg to Sabine Pass and Galveston, so that in all future time, you shall not drop a tear of affection on their hallowed resting-place, except by permits begged from that incarnate traitor, Jefferson Davis, we are not worthy of the brave men who sleep there in their bloody shrouds. If we allow the flag of disunion to float over the grave of the Father of his Country, on your own Potomac, the slow, unmoving finger of scorn, should be pointed at all of us while we live in the country we have thus disgraced.

But it will not be. We will keep faith with the dead of the Revolution. We will follow the flag of our fathers as the tribes of old did the fiery pillar. We will not yield the contest till every Malakoff of treason is reduced, and every suffering Lucknow of the South shall hear the slogan of deliverance. And trusting in that Providence who was the God of our fathers, we will look forward hopefully to His answer to the prayers that ascend morning and evening, from a million hearthstones, and which we can all join in to-night.

“GOD SAVE THE AMERICAN REPUBLIC.”

Letter of President Lincoln to A. G. Hodges, Esq.

EXECUTIVE MANSION, WASHINGTON, April 4, 1864.

A. G. Hodges, Esq., Frankfort, Ky.:

MY DEAR SIR:—You ask me to put in writing the substance of what I verbally said the other day, in your presence, to Governor Bramlette and Senator Dixon. It was about as follows:

“I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think and feel. And yet I have never understood that the presidency conferred upon me an unrestricted right to act officially upon this judgment and feeling. It was in the oath I took, that I would to the best of my ability preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States. I could not take the office without taking the oath. Nor was it my view, that I might take an oath to get power, and break the oath, in using the power. I understood, too, that, in ordinary civil administration, this oath even forbade me to practically indulge my primary, abstract judgment on the moral question of slavery. I had publicly declared this many times, and in many ways. And I aver that, to this day, I have done no official act in mere deference to my abstract judgment and feeling on slavery.

“I did understand, however, that my oath to preserve the Constitution to the best of my ability imposed upon me the duty of preserving, by every indispensable means, that Government—that Nation—of which that Constitution was the organic law. Was it possible to lose the Nation, and yet preserve the Constitution?

“By general law, life and limb must be protected; yet often a limb must be amputated to save a life; but a life is never wisely given to save a limb. I felt that measures, otherwise unconstitutional, might become lawful, by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the Constitution through the preservation of the Nation. Right or wrong, I assumed this ground, and now avow it. I could not feel, that to the best of my ability, I had ever tried to preserve the Constitution, if to save slavery, or any minor matter, I should permit the wreck of Government, Country and Constitution, all together.

“When, early in the war, Gen. Fremont attempted military emancipation, I forbade it, because I did not then think it an indispensable necessity. When, a little later, General Cameron, then Secretary of War, suggested the arming of the blacks, I objected, because I did not yet think it an indispensable necessity. When, still later, General

Hunter attempted military emancipation, I again forbade it, because I did not yet thing the indispensable necessity had come.

“When, in March, and May, and July, 1862, I made earnest and successive appeals to the Border States to favor compensated emancipation, I believed the indispensable necessity for military emancipation, and arming the blacks would come, unless averted by that measure. They declined the proposition; and I was, in my best judgment, driven to the alternative of either surrendering the Union, and with it the Constitution, or of laying strong hand upon the colored element. I chose the latter. In choosing it, I hoped for greater gain than loss: but of this I was not entirely confident.

“More than a year of trial now shows no loss by it, in our foreign relations, none in our home popular sentiment; none in our white military force;—no loss by it, anyhow, or any where. On the contrary, it shows a gain of quite a hundred and thirty thousand soldiers, seamen and laborers. These are palpable facts, about which, as facts, there can be no caviling. We have the men, and we could not have had them without the measure.

“And now, let any Union man, who complains of the measure, test himself, by writing down in one line that he is for subduing the rebellion by force of arms, and in the next that he is for taking these hundred and thirty thousand men from the Union side, and placing them where they would be but for the measure he condemns. If he cannot face his case so stated, it is only because he cannot face the truth.

I add a word which was not in the verbal conversation. In telling this tale, I attempt no compliment to my own sagacity. I claim not to have controled events, but confess plainly that events have controled me. Now, at the end of three years’ struggle, the nation’s condition is not what either party or any man devised or expected. God alone can claim it. Whither it is tending seems plain. If God alone wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North, as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God.

Yours, truly,

A. LINCOLN.

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